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Article

Touching Queerness in Disney Films *Dumbo* and *Lilo & Stitch*

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Abstract: Disney's influence as a cultural purveyor is difficult to overstate. From cinema screen to television programming, vacation theme parks to wardrobe, toys and books, Disney's consistent ability to entertain children as well as adults has made it a mainstay of popular culture. This research will look at two Disney films, *Dumbo* (1941)¹ and *Lilo & Stitch* (2002),² both from distinctly different eras, and analyze the similarities in artistic styling, studio financial climate, and their narrative representation of otherness as it relates to Queer identity.

Keywords: *Dumbo*; *Lilo & Stitch*; Disney; queer; mean girls; boobs and boyfriends; girl cartoon; gender; pink elephants; commodification; Walter Benjamin

1. Introduction

As a Cuban-American child growing up in Miami during *el exilio*,³ my experience as an other meant my cultural heritage was tied to an island diaspora. Learning about Cuban identity was easy because everyone around me was Cuban; we all read, wrote and spoke in Spanish. Cuban identity was our heritage; American identity was learned. Though television programs like *Sesame Street* and *Captain Kangaroo* were instrumental in helping me learn to speak English, my strongest personal connection to what identified American culture was Disney. I loved everything Disney and happily consumed all kinds of Disney cultural products—I loved wearing Disney clothes, having Disney-themed birthday parties, reading Disney books, watching *The Wonderful World of Disney* on television every weekend and taking yearly family trips to Walt Disney World. Within its pantheon of cultural products, it was Disney animation that cemented my fandom, and among all the loveable Disney characters, my strongest association was with the baby elephant, Dumbo. Dumbo was my favorite stuffed animal, Dumbo the Flying Elephant was my favorite Disney World ride, and *Sharpsteen* (1941) was my all-time favorite Disney movie, until I saw *Sanders and DeBlois* (2002).

This article will explore the similarities of these two films' artistic styling, the financial landscape of Disney Studios at the time of production, and the use of othering as a narrative drive. Much has been written about Disney's hegemonic representation of a world represented by the ruling elite (Seiter 1993; Bell et al. 1995; Ortega 1998). White characters are in power and are good and pure hearted, while dark-skinned characters are subservient, dim-witted, and often villainous. Christian undertones and the battle of good versus evil are the norm in Disney

¹ Director Ben Sharpsteen, artist Joe Grant and Dick Huemer.

² Directors Dean DeBlois and Chris Sanders.

³ Beginning in 1960 and spanning nearly a decade, *El Exilio* is the era where roughly half a million Cubans, predominantly educated professionals, emigrated to the US seeking political asylum after the Cuban Revolution and were predominantly settled in Miami.

productions (Cholodenko 1991; Bell et al. 1995; Leslie 2002) as well as heterosexual romance and women's subservient positioning (Zipes 1995). This research will draw upon the existing cultural critique of each individual film as well as present a coding system of Queer signifiers represented throughout each film, in order to draw a comparative analysis of how outsider identity presents itself. The research will add insight to how these identities touch Queerness and create new portals for Queer critique from within a Disney culture industry product.

2. Cartoon Theory and Methodology

Cartoons can present a counter-hegemonic potential to the culture industry, particularly because the medium lubricates deviation from the dominant paradigms of thought. Walter Benjamin expressed in his writings on Mickey Mouse (Leslie 2002, p. 105) that he believed in the potential that popular media, particularly early Disney cartoons, could have in countering bourgeois sensibilities. He believed the masses could internalize the images of the animations' abdication of mental laws and as a result begin to question the rules of society. Sergei Eisenstein described this ability to express the revolutionary and convey any idea, however outlandish, "morphing [any shape] without apparent regard for narrative logic that could at any moment transform into anything else", as cartoons' 'plasmaticness' (Sammond 2012, p. 153). Siegfried Kracauer wrote similarly in his review of *Dumbo* in *The Nation*, suggesting that "[cartoons tend towards] the dissolution rather than the reinforcement of conventional reality" (Kracauer 1941). Because of this potential to deviate from the dominant paradigms of thought, cartoons facilitate playful transgressions on normative coding. Benjamin lamented the loss of this potential upon the release of *Snow White* (1937). The Disney film set the standard for gendered representation in children's motion picture production (Seiter 1993) and created an animation standard of narrative and realism, moving it away from its initial presentation of alternative, surrealistic imagery and subversive, socio-cultural perspectives (Cholodenko 1991; Benshoff 1992; Leslie 2002) which Benjamin claimed brought moralistic values and sexual repression, making cartoons into a respectable consumption for bourgeois sensibilities (Leslie 2002, p. 121).

This critique is exemplified best through Disney's own attempt to repackage *Lilo & Stitch* and *Dumbo's* Pink Elephants scene. After the success of *Lilo & Stitch*, Disney released several franchise movies, the first of which was titled *Stitch! The Movie* (2003), followed by *Lilo & Stitch 2: Stitch has a Glitch* (2005) and *Leroy and Stitch* (2006). Disney's attempt to repackage the films as a recommodifiable product meant the downplay of Lilo herself, the girl character, emphasizing the focus on Stitch, the boy character, presumably to follow the industry's old gendered adage that girls will watch a boy character but boys will not watch a girl character, even though the success of the original film had already proven otherwise. Not since *Alice in Wonderland* (1951) had there been a lead girl character that was not a princess; the focus onto Stitch removed the gendered counter-hegemonic potential of the film franchise.

The repackaging of *Dumbo's* Pink elephant scene (46:30) into the Heffalump scene (12:05) in Disney's *Winnie the Pooh and the Blustery Day* (1968) is a more pronounced example of this. It is a perfect specimen for the description that represents an innate resistance to counter-hegemonic potential simply by attempting to make it for everyone, making it less sensibly marginal. What troubles me most is that the watering down, the dumbing down, is conditional in creating a children's product. Shot by shot, the Heffalump scene is almost an identical reproduction of the Pink Elephants scene, yet since it is intended for children to consume, it is made softer, cuter, and especially gendered, whereas the Pink Elephants scene was gender neutral. While some of the changes are subtle, such as the music change of minor key in Pink Elephants to major key in Heffalumps (Bohn 2017), other changes are a bit more obvious. Actively undoing the Queer signifiers, the androgynous pink elephants (29:02) are now wearing gendered clothing (14:03), creating a heteronormative identity. Winnie the Pooh's Heffalump scene and the removal of Lilo's name from the title of the franchise films are evidence of this mechanism of how capitalism stays current and yet retains bourgeoisie sensibilities. This occurs through the removal of aspects of dissent from the culturally innovated product, in this

case, the counter-hegemonic gender signifiers, that involves feeding it back to the same population as a watered down version.

The methodology used in this research initiated a thematic coding scheme by textually analyzing the films, documenting what is occurring both verbally and visually to identify markers of Queer identity both overt and naturally transgressive, traditional performative traits and subtle, counter-normative characteristics. This includes, but is not limited to, dialogue, behaviors, images, songs, clothing, jokes, background design, secondary characters, and friendship dynamics. It is a difficult hurdle for Disney scholars to publish with accompanying images from Disney films because the company is very protective of its images as enforced by property infringement restrictions. As such, these occurrences of identifiable markers, as well as descriptive moments in both films are identified by the film's time code to facilitate the reader's finding the scenes referenced on their own.

3. Similarities in Studio Economics and Artistic Choices

The two films, *Sharpsteen* (1941) and *Sanders and DeBlois* (2002), were released in very different eras, more than half a century apart, yet the two films share some interesting similarities. *Dumbo* and *Lilo & Stitch* are both the studios' 'little picture that could'. Both these films had been shelved projects that were produced as Disney studios' cost-efficient attempts for financial stability. When *Sharpsteen* (1941) came out in theaters, it was preceded by two major financial failures for Disney studios (*Barrier* 1999), *Pinocchio* (1940) and *Fantasia* (1940), and followed by the financial failure of *Bambi* (1942); the studio at the time was also in the midst of labor disputes (*Barrier* 2007, p. 176). Walt Disney was able to physically distance himself from the labor strikes at his studio under the guise of traveling as research for upcoming film projects, *Saludos Amigos* (1942) and *Los Tres Caballeros* (1944). He had departed in August of that year as a representative for the South American Goodwill Tour, sponsored by Nelson Rockefeller for the newly established US State Department office of the Coordination of Inter-American Affairs in an attempt to build propaganda with Latin America to counter-act the penetration of pro-Nazi influences in those countries and create a defensive super-bloc (*Langer* 1990, p. 310; *Leslie* 2002, p. 212). *Sanders and DeBlois* (2002) had a similar fiscal landscape at Disney Studios, preceded by the financial failures of *The Emperor's New Groove* (2000) and *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001) and like *Dumbo*, was soon followed by another financial failure, *Treasure Planet* (2002) (*Corliss* 2002). Although they were not in strikes, in 2002 "Disney animation studios shed 500 jobs because of escalating production and labor costs and slashed animators' salaries by 30% to 50%" (*Eller and Verrier* 2002).

Aside from the similarities in their financial landscape, these two films also share the aesthetic similarity of being painted in watercolor. Watercolor was being used regularly in Disney shorts but feature narratives were painstakingly created in time-consuming hand-painted cells that drove up the labor costs. For *Dumbo*, the use of watercolor was to ensure that production was not cost-prohibitive. When *Lilo & Stitch* was made, the use of watercolor background had not been used since the 1940s (*Turan* 2002; *Fischer* 2002; *Vincent* 2002). Because the film was released in the era of CGI (computer-generated images)-dominated feature narratives, and *Lilo & Stitch's* return to watercolor was not motivated by cost but rather an intentional aesthetic choice. As co-creator Dean DeBlois points out, "Watercolor seemed to complement [the film] so much with the residual line that gets left behind in the tracedowns, and the fact that it's a transparent medium left a glow. It's perfect for portraying Hawaii, with its organic volumes of light. It's so lush and overgrown" (*Desowitz* 2002, p. 5).

The production of *Dumbo* also had the unique predicament of being a 'hands-off' film for Walt Disney, who was on his South American tour. Production control was chiefly exercised by storymen Joe Grant and Dick Huemer who rewrote the story and added the unique Pink Elephants sequence to the film, a segment that Disney scholar Mark Langer feels would not have been added had Walt Disney been overseeing the project. Langer explains,

"While West Coast animation was more consistent with the codes of classic Hollywood cinema, the New Yorker style violated those codes through its emphasis on the artificial

quality of animation. . . . motivation and causality tended to be discarded in favor of dreamlike connections between events". (Langer 1990, p. 310)

The East Coast animators' style had the expositional feel that Benjamin claimed helped the audience recognize the constructions of the world, whereas West Coast style exemplifies Benjamin's critique of a tamed, naturalistic Disney product.

Though the use of watercolor was not a financially driven decision for *Lilo & Stitch*, changing production style was. Then President of Walt Disney Animation Tom Schumacher granted writing and storyboard direction to co-creators Dean DeBlois and Chris Sanders, who had just worked together on *Mulan* (1998), with the intention of creating a personalized artist driven project. DeBlois said of the process, "we thought if we had the freedom, we could probably lop a whole year off the production time of the film—just by maintaining a consistency from the people who wrote the screenplay pages to the people who storyboarded it and cut it together into story reels and the oversaw its production" (Fischer 2002, p. 7). *Lilo & Stitch's* release was a presumed a studio risk by industry watchers when its weekend release coincided with the Steven Spielberg film *Minority Report* (2002) starring Tom Cruise. The financial risk of these first-time directors versus one of Hollywood's most celebrated directors was a success; *Lilo & Stitch* tied *Minority Report* in the box-office tally (Vincent 2002). The studio had made the right choice.

4. Otherness, Commodification and the Body

The other similarity I would like to acknowledge is how the two films share a particular sense of identifying otherness as the central storyline. The idea of other I associated with as a child watching *Dumbo* was reawakened when I watched the out-spoken, native Hawaiian, seven-year-old, Lilo.

While there had already been non-white female characters represented in Disney Animation prior to *Lilo & Stitch*, the identifier of girl needs to be addressed in that Lilo is seven years old whereas Pocahontas is animated as an adult with a curvaceous adult body and the rest, Mulan, Tiana and Moana have young adult bodies.⁴ As a seven-year-old, Lilo is a girl, not a woman, represented without any overt sexualization, such as breast, curves, sexually suggestive clothing, or romantic interest. In my research, I find twelve to be the age where animators portray girl characters with "boobs and boyfriends", a sexually objectifiable body for the gaze usually accompanied by a heteronormative romantic interest (Perea 2015). As a seven-year-old, Lilo's Queerness is free from these sexualized representations.

Much has been written about Dumbo's resonated difference (Glassmeyer 2014; Harrington 2014; Langer 1990; Sammond 2012). I have no doubt that this difference is why I associated with him so strongly. As a Queer adult, I often look to where I touched Queer as a child (Moñoz 2009, p. 1); what were my earliest moments of identifying who I was and what I wanted to be. When I saw *Dumbo* as a child, I identified with that little elephant because he was an outcast for being different. Dumbo's confidence as he becomes self-actualized, identifying his difference as his strength, is to me his Queerness touched. Lilo is Queer when we meet her.

Upon meeting her, Lilo quickly reveals to us that she is not your typical little girl. In the first nine minutes of meeting Lilo, as a result she we get to see her swim in the Pacific ocean by herself next to a hammerhead shark, feed a peanut butter sandwich to her fish friend Pudge (10:22), navigate her breath in the big waves (10:50), skillfully take a photo of an obese tourist (11:12), get into a fist fight (13:22), describe her doll as having head parasites (14:33), listen to Elvis (15:35), and perform voodoo (19:30). In the opening scenes of *Lilo & Stitch*, scientist Jumba is on trial for creating an alien monster,

⁴ *Pocahontas* (1995) is the first Disney non-white female protagonist. As a native Hawaiian girl, Lilo is the third non-white female character to be given a lead role in a Disney animated film, Mulan being the second, four years prior in *Mulan* (1998), and repeated seven years later with Tiana in *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and another seven years later with Moana in *Moana* (2016).

experiment number 626. The Galactic Council is mortified by the monstrosity and gasp. In transport to exile, he escapes to Earth and lands at a dog pound in Kauai, Hawaii. He is named Stitch when adopted by Lilo, and her nineteen-year-old sister Nani. Much like many Disney stories, Lilo's parents are deceased and as a result, she is being raised by her older sister Nani, who works full time to support the household. This is woven in as a central plotline to the narrative conflict. If Nani, Lilo, and Stitch do not learn how to create a stable household, their family will be separated; Lilo will be sent to the foster care system and Stitch will be exiled on an abandoned asteroid. After shootings, chasings, and kidnappings, Lilo manages to rehabilitate Stitch into a best friend and convince the Galactic Councilwoman that he is *Ohana*. "*Ohana means family. No one gets left behind or forgotten*" (36:15).

The narrative format of outsider identity is similar in *Dumbo*. Dumbo is a happy baby elephant that is shunned by his community because his large ears make him different and unique. Though never discussed by other Disney scholars, I believe Dumbo's ears reveal that he is presumably a child of bicontinental origins. All the elephants in the circus, including Mrs. Jumbo, are identifiable as Indian elephants, *Elephas maxius indicus*, which have much smaller ears than African elephants, *Loxodonta africana*. It can be deduced that Mr. Jumbo is of African ancestry and that Dumbo's ears are physical markers of this.⁵ Within the first minute of meeting baby Dumbo, the other elephants ridicule him because of his ears, "Jumbo, more like Dumbo" (09:50). "The ridicule is aggressive and cunning; Dumbo is oblivious and his absent doe-eyed reaction only furthers the viewers' sympathy and idealization of his position" (Harrington 2014, p. 125). This harshness is quickly wiped away by Dumbo's mother as she shuts the mean ladies out and playfully gives her baby loving affection; we quickly fall in love with his gentle sweetness and recognize the love of an affirming mother (11:30). Queer kids are disproportionately kicked out of their homes for their difference; Dumbo is loved and accepted by his mother with his Queerness seen. Speaking volumes with his feelings, baby Dumbo never utters a word the entire film, with the exception of a happy squeak he lets out while bathing (17:40). *Dumbo* is the only Disney animated feature in which the title character never talks.

When Dumbo's mother spansks the bully human child that assaulted baby Dumbo, she is swiftly and violently beaten, restrained with chains, and jailed (20:00) A new mother protecting her child is incarcerated and the child is left in negligent, emotionally abusive foster care. "For every child under ten who sees the movie, the chaining and imprisoning of Mrs. Jumbo must be a nearly traumatic experience" (Willmington 1980, p. 77). "This moment in the film is indulgently sentimental and gratuitously manipulative" (Harrington 2014, p. 129). Claiming to be of "a proud race" (21:50), the other elephants shun Dumbo, who is subsequently befriended by a circus mouse, similarly modeled after Jiminy Cricket from the preceding year's Disney film *Pinocchio* (1940). Timothy openly claims that there is nothing wrong with Dumbo's ears, "in fact, I think they are quite decorative" (24:45). Following a night of accidental intoxication with his workplace buddy, Dumbo meets some free-flying crows that live in the trees close to the circus camp.

[This scene] has usually been perceived as Disney's first major use of characters that are racially marked as black. The crows who find it hard to believe Dumbo can fly inhabit a set of codes that are readily recognizable as performance of blackness which conform to white audience expectations in the 1940s, drawing on the codes current in music hall and short cartoons for supposedly 'obvious' character traits". (Byrne and McQuillan 1999, p. 96)

When we meet the crows, they are hanging out and sporting super cool fashion: spats with a vest, pink sunglasses, striped turtlenecks, even enjoying a cigar (51:51). Some scholars refer to the lead crow as Jim Crow, though there is no indication that he was named that in the original script nor production notes. However, though it was honestly not creator Dick Huemer's intention, made evident

⁵ This interpretation mirrors a natural uniqueness due to the ineffectiveness of cross-breeding the two types of elephants. The one recorded birth was baby elephant Motty in the Cleveland Zoo in 1978 who sadly did not survive past two months (Rees 2001).

by how easily he dismissed it when addressed, and I would add that the basis for the critique is not in the characters but the minstrel-style portrayal in the art itself. These crows are all painted the same shade of black; along with their white eyes, this bears a strong resemblance to a minstrel's black face. This portrayal is a glaring oversight when compared to the animated elephants who are all painted different shades of grey tones. This same artistic choice could easily have been made with the crows. Some purple could have been added around the neckline where crows have iridescent feathers, or simply different tones of black ink. With the understanding that intention is different from impact, the artistic decision to paint them all the same shade demonstrates an application of minstrel-type imagery, albeit self-identified by Huemer as unintentional. When asked about the crows' racial critique, Huemer was surprised to hear it because he remembers that the film makers went out of their way to ensure that black voice actors were hired to voice the crows, an uncommon practice during a time that was difficult for black voice actors to find work.

“[W]hen veteran Disney animator Dick Huemer was confronted years later, in 1978, with the suggestion that the crows were racist, he bridled, suggesting that the ‘colored choir who had sung “When I See an Elephant Fly” and voiced some of the crows’ voices had liked it very much and enjoyed doing it hugely. They even offered suggestions, and we used some of their ideas, lines of dialogue or words, little touches . . . I don’t think the crow sequence is derogatory. In fact, when someone mentioned the possibility to me, I was quite taken aback. I never gave the angle a thought and I still don’t”. (Sammond 2012, p. 161)

After some playful teasing, the crows help Dumbo believe in his ability to fly by giving him one of their own black feathers as a talisman; the Magic Feather (59:05). Believing in himself and the power of his otherness, Dumbo triumphs as a celebrated wonder. In the end, though, he chose to stay in the circus with his mother (1:03:07), a decision I never felt comfortable with, particularly because the ringmaster had violently whipped his mother and the other elephants ridiculed him with amused contempt. This observation is also shared by film analyst Siegfried Kracauer who reviewed *Dumbo* upon its theatrical release and noted that,

“[Y]oung Dumbo, instead of flying off toward some unknown paradise, chooses wealth and security and so ends as the highly paid star of the same circus director who once flogged his mother Jumbo”. (Kracauer 1941, p. 2)

Although there is similar emancipation in both narratives- Dumbo flies free from his abusive fate as a clown and his mother is freed from jail—Lilo stays out of the foster care system and Stitch is freed from his role of child weapon⁶-Timothy mouse portrays a confident, optimistic personality to help guide a distraught Dumbo, yet Lilo and Stitch are both equally marked by outsider identity. To the aliens, Stitch is an outlaw, sentenced to exile in isolation as his only safe alternative because he’s a dangerous agent of chaos. Lilo herself is quickly revealed as a perceived trouble maker when the hula instructor realizes she is late and exclaims “Ay-yi-yi” (11:53). Basically, he is not surprised that she is late. She cements this outsider identity when she explains her lateness to him.

[Lilo] “Every Thursday I take Pudge the fish a peanut butter sandwich”. [Instructor] “Pudge is a fish?” [Lilo] “And today we were out of peanut butter! So I asked my sister what to give him and she said a tuna sandwich. I can’t give Pudge tuna! Do you know what tuna is?” [Instructor] “Fish?” [Lilo] “It’s fish! If I gave Pudge tuna, I’d be an abomyou’re ination! I’m late because I had to go to the store and get peanut butter ‘cause all we have is stinkin’ tuna!” [Instructor] “Lilo, Lilo, why is this so important?” [Lilo] “Pudge controls the weather”. (12:45)

⁶ As he has presumably newly been created by Jumba, Stitch is a baby monster.

When Lilo asks the instructor “do you know what tuna is?” she reveals that this is a new concept for her and she assumes that others may not have yet figured it out. This is an existential awareness for Lilo, making the connection of a food to the animal of its source and its perceived insensitivity to her friend Pudge. Damian Alexander points out that of course Lilo is invested in a friendship with a fish that controls the weather because we later learn that her parents’ fatal car crash was during a rainstorm (Alexander 2017). At this explanation, Mertle Emmonds, the leader of the other little girls, says to Lilo, “you’re crazy” (13:22), to which Lilo responds by punching her in the face and biting her.

In my cartoon research I have found the archetype of mean girl to represent a constructed, normative aspect of femininity that can be used to challenge the empowerment of girl characters like Lilo (Perea 2015). Mertle Edmunds is a mean girl. Though Lilo is strong and defies ‘girly’ stereotypes, Mertle reinforces that those ‘girly’ stereotypes are accurate. The mean girl presents a constructed boundary to the protagonist girl’s empowered transgressions. The mean girl is gendered with characteristics that are intentionally absent in the main character. She is superficial, snobby, manipulative; she is not nice and is often popular. While Lilo is potentially transgressing gender normative coding, the portrayal of what is considered a normative girl, Mertle, makes Lilo into an exception, an other, and thus her Queer signifiers remain as outsider identities.

In their own way, the supporting characters of Lilo and Stitch’s *ohana* are all outsiders. Nani is suddenly thrust into single parent head of household, which prevents her from having a normal young adult social life (33:38). Outsiderness also accompanies Stitch’s potential capturers, Jumba, a self-identified evil genius, now a disgraced scientist (08:42), and Pleekley, who is gendered as an alien male in clothing and pronouns, decides upon arriving in Kauai to don women’s clothing as a disguise and finds himself quite comfortable “looking pretty” in his wig, dress, purse, and makeup (38:30).

Dumbo’s Timothy is also an outsider of sorts; the archetypical hustler character that welcomes the new stranger, “hey kid, you’re all alone, let me show you the ropes. Here, have a peanut.” However, Timothy is in a uniform. He is part of the industry, presumably part of an unseen ‘mouse circus’ act in the Casey Jr. circus. Timothy sees Dumbo’s ears as a way into circus stardom and commodifies Dumbo’s otherness as a means to raise their class status and qualify them both as celebrated participants of industry. Stitch and Lilo’s otherness is not packaged for consumption. Though at the end of the film both protagonists remain outcasts, they are no longer trying to find the place where they belong because they belong together. This is representational of what the Queer community refers to as ‘chosen family’- the fellow Queer weirdos that join together to give each other the love and support that is denied to them because of their outsider status.

As outsiders, Dumbo, Stitch, and Lilo are all gasped at in some point of the films. Stitch proclaims some sort of alien profanity that causes the Galactic Council to gasp and one robot member to vomit nuts and bolts (2:30). Dumbo receives a resounding gasp from the other elephants when his ears are revealed (10:38), yet he smiles at them, and later he happily wiggles his ears to the boys in the circus before they physically assault him. Lilo’s gasp is not directed at her but her handmade doll Scrupp who has a misshapen, oversized head (14:33).

Dumbo’s smile and Lilo’s attempts to play dolls show that neither is anti-social. Lilo’s interests in dolls is a girl gender marker; she is revealed as desirous for the world. “I made her, but her head is too big. So I pretend a bug laid eggs in her ears, and she’s upset because she only has a few more days to . . . ” (14:35). As she realizes that the girls have walked away and abandoned her, she throws Scrupp on the ground and stomps away, only to return and pick her up and give her a loving, affectionate embrace. Lilo initially faults Scrupp for her weirdness and throws her out, only to return with the affirmation that she truly loves her and embraces her with deep affection. This quality of Lilo, to love Scrupp with Queerness seen, is what facilitates Lilo’s connection to Stitch.

This outsider connection between Stitch and Lilo is intentionally shown early on through dialogue initiated by Gantu asking his command crew “does this look infected to you?” (04:00), after a restrained Stitch manages to bite him. The exact line is repeated ten minutes later by Mertle Evans after Lilo bites her and she asks the other little girls “does this look infected to you?” (14:11). Lilo is self-aware of her

outsider identity when she explains to Nani, “people treat me differently”. (22:35). After Nani comforts Lilo and the sisters make up, Lilo gives Nani a roll of film to develop. We see her body of work on the wall by her bed. A photo essay on what we saw earlier, that even though she was running late for hula practice, she did not compromise her artistic integrity, taking a step back to fit the colossal tourist body into the frame. She runs her hand over her art and says to Nani, “aren’t they beautiful?” (22:58).

Lilo is affirming of bodies that are otherwise seen as unattractive by the presumed viewer; it is never mentioned by Lilo nor Nani who are both native Hawaiians that those bodies are not normative. It is not that Lilo does not see these bodies as fat, in the way of ‘I don’t see fat’, like the problematic ‘I don’t see color’. She does see the difference yet does not perceive this as a social stigma. Lilo’s perception of outsider bodies deviates from the dominant paradigms of thought that often expects that Queer bodies have to conform. Much like Stitch has to tuck his extra set of limbs and tentacles, Dumbo attempts to bind his ears so as to hide the freak inside. Both Dumbo and Stich need to conform their Queer bodies in order to fit into normative standards of bodily acceptability.⁷

Lilo is accepting of oddities. It is her own outsider identity that allows her to have the space in her life to welcome an alien outcast, which in turn allows Stich to gain freedom from incarceration, Pleakley from his bureaucratic servitude, and Jumba from intellectual disgrace; yet it is not an entry point into the status quo. This is revealed in the end of the film when the Galactic Councilwoman advises that Stich is serving his life sentence in exile on Kauai: “We will check in from time to time” (1:16:47), and advises her ship’s crew that Jumba and Pleakley are not welcome: “don’t let those two get on my ship” (1:17:03). Whereas Dumbo is recognized as a celebrity amongst those that previously shunned him, the end credits of *Lilo & Stitch* reveal that the new *ohana*, composed of Nani, Lilo, Stich, Jumba, and Pleakley, all live in the same house with little gain in social or economic status.

5. Conclusions

“*This is my family. I found it all on my own. It is little, and broken, but still good*” (1:15:05). In the Queer community we use the term “chosen family” to refer to the Queer folks we surround ourselves with as adults, primarily because so many of us have been rejected by our birth families. These associations with each other help form the definitions of our Queer identities and in turn, our vision of the future of Queer: our Queer future has a gay past. We use a shared recollection of the past, a past accessed by us through avenues such as films, poems, novels, historical writings, photography, art, and oral histories. These access points to our Queer past are tied to homosexual and transgender people—historical cultural purveyors who performed Queerness. Yet Queerness is not exclusively about details surrounding sexual relations, or how you present your gender. It is about many other things—outsider identity markers that change with time in a social structure that shapes our identities through performativity.

The outsider identity signifiers of *Dumbo* and *Lilo & Stitch* are relatable to all who have experienced otherness. My Queer read on these films does not claim these signifiers as exclusively Queer, nor does it claim Queer identity on all who experience outsiderhood. I am reading the Queer experience of the signifiers, showing up the Queer performativity of the characters, and the Queer realness of the narrative to demonstrate how these identities touch Queerness and create new portals for Queer critique from within a Disney culture industry product.

After the success of *Snow White* (1937), Disney’s film set the standard for gendered representation in children’s motion picture production and created an animation standard of not just how cartoons were to look but also what messages they were allowed to deliver, moving cartoons away from their initial presentation of alternative, surrealistic imagery and subversive, socio-cultural perspectives (Cholodenko 1991; Benshoff 1992; Leslie 2002; Seiter 1993; Wells 2002). Disney scholar Mark Langer

⁷ Though not explored here, it is valuable to note that much has been written on how Native people, people with disabilities, immigrants, and People of Color have to alter their appearance to fit into dominant society.

points out that “the tendency among scholars [is] to ignore discontinuities within the Disney opus [to] confirm the existence of an internally unified style or vision” (Langer 1990, p. 305). These two films, *Dumbo* and *Lilo & Stitch*, reveal that transgressions of these Disney standard normative codes are possible from within the very cultural industry that creates them, and not in an emphatic display of gender non-conforming, like *Mulan* (Ortega 1998), but rather in a playful transgression, like the androgynous coupling of the pink elephants or Lilo performing Voodoo and listening to Elvis. Disney products can also be used to display Queerness; it is for us to find that magic feather.

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